

TELEGRAM

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POLIS

Ref:

CLASSIFICATION

BUENOS AIRES 3142

A) Buenos Aires 2528 B) Buenos Aires 2061

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)
U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS
Margaret P. Grafeld, Director
(X) Release () Excise () Deny
Exemption(s): _____
Declassify: () In Part (X) In Full
() Classify as _____ () Extend as _____ () De
Date _____ Declassify on _____

1. Summary. Because of increasing doubts concerning moderate line originally professed by Junta, major political parties and trade unions are reassessing their positions. Their major complaint is that military government is not remaining within law as promised; rather, it is making widespread arrests and has intervened unions which it had promised it would not touch. Most observers agree that Videla is well intentioned but has not been able--or has not yet chosen--to assert his authority. Thus, individual commanders and interventors are doing pretty much as they please. There is still hope that Videla will firmly take command and guarantee moderate line. If not, situation could begin to deteriorate rapidly. End Summary.

CLEARANCES:
DAO: Col PACoughlin
POL/R: DLSmock *gld*

DCM: MChaplin

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2. Leading antiverticalista Peronists have informed us during the past week that they are very much disturbed by direction events are taking and are putting in cold storage any plans to cooperate with govt. Document entitled 'summary of situation' now being circulated among Peronists points to arbitrary arrests, intervention of unions and unhappiness with economic program as major causes of their concern. As one Peronist leader described situation: Quote. Military promised us that, although those guilty of flagrant corruption or abuse of power would be punished, there would be no massive arrests nor vengeance against Peronists after coup. For first two or three weeks they seemed to be living up to promises. Since then, however, number of those detained has increased drastically. Many are being picked up 'on suspicion' and being held incommunicado with no idea as to charges, if any, against them. We had been told that only a few hundred would be arrested, but according to our estimates over 4,000 are now being held and number is growing daily. Unless govt shifts back to moderate line soon, we will have no choice but to go into opposition. Close Quote.

3. UCR sees situation in much the same terms as the Peronists. One leading UCR official commented to us last week that UCR has impression there is no strong central authority or line; rather, each commander and interventor of municipality is doing as he wishes. In some cases, this has led to closure

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Page 3 of

3142

MRN

of UCR headquarters and arrest of a number of Radicales.

Additionally, three branches of service seem to be operating almost independently of one another. Navy is arresting people without telling Army, and vice versa. Result is extremely confused and arbitrary environment in which many are beginning to wonder if in fact they have any protection under the law.

4. Were it only Peronists, Radicales and other politicians expressing concern, Embassy would take complaints with reservations, for while sincere, they are not objective observers. We are getting similar reports, however, from many and disparate sources, including some within government. American newsmen are picking up same kinds of reports; thus, unless some rectifications are made soon, Junta may begin to receive bad press abroad.

5. Neither Peronists nor Radicales are accusing Videla himself of bad faith; rather, they believe problems result from his failure to control the hardliners. This tends to coincide with Embassy's own analysis. We note, for example, that despite his explicit orders (see ref A), Videla has been unable to produce a comprehensive list of those detained. Source very close to presidency tells us Army Corps Commanders have already provided Videla with lists of detainees in their zones of jurisdiction (whether lists are accurate and comprehensive is another matter). Hold up, source added, is

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that Navy has so far failed to provide roster of those held aboard ships in harbor, and since this includes many of most prominent members of last govt, comprehensive list cannot be issued without it.

6. Source admitted this reflected troubles Videla is having with Admiral Massera. There is evidence to support this beyond fact that Navy is dragging its feet on giving Videla list he wants. For example, several days ago Navy arrested one of Videla's civilian political advisors and held him aboard prison ship. Videla had to send Interior Minister Harguindeguy to effect advisor's release. Massera's motives in all this are not clear. Some believe he wants to be President himself. Embassy tends to discount this, however, if only because we believe Massera is smart enough to know Army not likely to accept (or accept for long at any rate) Navy man as Chief of State. It seems more likely to us that in effort to please officers under him who tend to be more hard line across the board than officers in other services and with whom he has been having his share of trouble, Massera may be swinging away from moderate line he once espoused and is taking course which may eventually pit him against Videla.

7. Part of the problem, too, may reside in awkward Junta-Presidency structure. Argentines are accustomed to concept of strong Presidency. Collegiate command, even in form of a Junta, throws them off stride. They therefore look to Videla

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for leadership but on Junta it is Massera who is most politically astute (few would argue with that). This produces in public eye something of a dyarchic image, or a confusion between what they think Videla should be and what Massera actually is.

8. As indicated in ref B, fending off hardliners and maintaining institutional cohesion were likely to be Videla's most difficult tasks. This indeed is turning out to be the case. Already, arbitrary arrests and failure to produce a list of those detained are causing damage to Junta's image. ERP and Montoneros are doubtless delighted with this turn of events. As they see it, the more repressive the govt, the more likely it is that they can gain some popular support and expand their activities. And, of course, best thing possible for them would be to see military beginning to fight among themselves.

9. Comment: In sum, what started off so well now seems in danger of going sour. If Videla and moderates behind him do not assert themselves soon, it may be too late. That Videla has let things drift for past two weeks or so is puzzling, as he would appear to have the strength and backing to impose his will if he so chose. Hardline corps commanders such as Generals Menendez and Diaz Bessone have not moved against him. So far, he has simply failed to assert himself. One theory is that he is decent man and professional soldier

UNCLASSIFIED

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Page 6 of

3142

MRN

with no instinct or drive for power. Another (espoused by source in para five) is that Videla is not weak; rather, he is biding his time and at appropriate moment will assert himself. Still another theory is that in order to maintain institutional cohesion, Videla must bend to hard line--i.e., if he tried to impose his own moderate policies across the board, Armed Forces would begin to split wide open.

10. Whatever his motives, fact is that Videla has not come to grips with situation and stopped drift toward harder line. In Embassy's judgement, unless he or someone else does, Junta will soon face serious difficulties both at home and abroad--abroad, because hardliners will give little attention to human rights and will create same sort of situation faced by Chilean Junta; at home, because hardliners will alienate major sectors and create kind of conditions under which leftist/extremists may pick up support and have some chance of making bid for power.

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